

ASSESSING THE EQUITY IMPLICATIONS OF HOT LANES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the earliest days of road improvement and construction in the United States, questions of fairness and equity have shaped decisions about how to finance transportation infrastructure and services. Today, equity debates are once again surfacing as state and regional governments consider a new mechanism for raising transportation dollars, so-called “HOT lanes” (or high-occupancy/toll lanes), where carpools drive for free, but single-occupant vehicles pay a toll to use the lanes. HOT lanes have been received skeptically in some corners and enthusiastically in others because they distribute transportation costs and benefits in new ways, thus forcing us to rethink what we believe to be a “fair” system of paying for transportation infrastructure. This report sets out strategies that policy makers, planners, and citizens can use to understand the equity implications that a particular HOT lane project might have, as well as techniques for designing the most equitable HOT lane projects possible.

The report begins by briefly suggesting how to define equity in the context of HOT lanes. We propose a practical working definition of equitable HOT lane projects as ones that distributes costs and benefits in an acceptable fashion across different groups of people. Coming to consensus on who the relevant groups are, as well as the likely costs and benefits, may be the first step a community takes in the process to decide whether or not a project has desirable—or at least acceptable—equity implications.

The next sections of the report discuss how HOT lanes and equity have been viewed by

planners involved in HOT lane projects in 11 regions of the country, as well as in the news media and the professional literature on transportation finance. Our research reveals that equity concerns arose throughout the 11 regions studied, and throughout the media coverage and published literature, but that the nature of concern and the ultimate impacts on individual projects varied.

In the concerns raised generally as equity issues by project participants, we identified three distinct types of concerns. Most common was concern about “income equity,” or the impact that HOT lanes would have on low-income drivers. In three regions, interviewees also raised what we have termed “geographic equity” concerns, a worry that the lanes would unfairly benefit or harm people based on where they lived or worked. Finally, in a few regions interviewees reported “modal equity” concerns, or objections to HOT lanes from transit or carpooling advocates who feared that HOT lane operations would increase the attractiveness of solo driving at the expense of alternative modes.

These varying equity concerns have shaped HOT lane projects in different ways. At one extreme, a project on Maryland’s U.S. 50 was stopped in its tracks in 2001 when then-governor Parris Glendening cancelled the project, arguing that it was unfair to low-income drivers. At the other end of the spectrum, the SR 91 HOT lanes connecting Orange and Riverside Counties in California proceeded largely as planned without major concern over equity. In between these examples fall most HOT lane efforts, where project sponsors have addressed equity concerns through specific planning and design elements.

Four strategies occurred most commonly for incorporating equity concerns into HOT lane planning and project design. First, project sponsors almost unanimously underscored the importance of conducting highly proactive public outreach and education efforts organized for an array of audiences. Second, some agencies explicitly incorporated equity analysis into the formal project planning process. Third, in two cases agency sponsors helped to alleviate concerns about equity by shaping their HOT lane initiatives as pilot projects, whereby the HOT lane facility will operate and be monitored on a test basis for a few years to ensure that it has no unacceptable impacts. Finally, in some regions sponsoring agencies, elected officials, and stakeholders have crafted revenue expenditure plans designed to address equity concerns by funding some alternative benefit or compensation for those who cannot afford the toll.

Drawing from these research results, we recommend a series of steps that VTA or other agencies developing HOT lane proposals can use to address equity concerns effectively. The first advises VTA to address equity proactively and comprehensively throughout planning and implementation phases, while recommendations 2 through 5 provide guidance on how best to address equity in the planning phase.